JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MEMPHIS & THE MID-SOUTH
Founded in 1986

The Civil War:
Why Would a 'Nice Jewish Boy' Join the Confederate Army?

By Marcia Levy

Excerpt from the Winter 2010 Newsletter:

When examining the early history of the Jews in the South, some questions inevitably arise: What motivated Jews to enlist in the Confederate army? Why, with a long history of persecution including enslavement in Egypt, were southern Jews ready to fight for a cause that believed in the perpetuation of slavery?

Most Jews came to America to seek the freedoms which were not granted to them in their native countries. At the time of the Civil War, there were approximately 150,000 Jews living here. Of these, the majority lived in the North and supported the Union; however, about 25,000 lived in the South and were supporters of the Confederacy. One explanation for this loyalty to the Confederacy may be found in the words of the eminent Jewish historian Rabbi Jacob Rader Marcus, who wrote that the southern Jew was a "regional type … He could not escape his environment; the pattern he followed was the pattern of a host of Southerners."

By the 1860s, many southern Jews had achieved a degree of financial security—some were themselves slaveholders. In addition, they benefited from the fact that prejudice which might have been directed toward Jews was focused primarily on blacks in the Old South. Like other members of their white communities, the southern Jews did not want to jeopardize their socio-economic position; thus they supported secession and were willing to contribute both men and money to the war effort.

A. E. Frankland, a prominent Jew who lived in Memphis during the Civil War, recorded the participation of a number of Memphis Jews in the Confederate army in his *Fragments of History*. The following excerpt is taken from this document, dated 1889-1890.

"At the outbreak of the civil war each section furnished as many Jews, according to ratio of population, as did any other class, of course. As was quite natural, they sided with the section that was their birthplace and their home. They volunteered as cheerful and served as patriotically as any other citizen, and were always to be found at the front. Many of them, alas, too many, gave up their lives in the struggle.

"Memphis, Tennessee, was not behind in her quota; nearly all her young men volunteered and went. There was no chance for substitutes in that section. We write section understandingly, for the imaginary lines of Messrs. Mason and Dixon had not then been obliterated.

"A novel and affecting incident occurred at the Temple Children of Israel during the Sabbath service. The following named enlisted volunteers, all uniformed in Confederate gray, marched into the building. Standing round the scrolls of the law, they recited the blessing, in chorus: Major Abraham S. Levy, Captain Maurice A. Freeman, Lieutenant Isaac Strauss, Corporal M. A. Kuhn, Privates Lou Leubrie, Samuel Jackson, Harry Cohen, Julius Nathan, Emil Gross, Harry Jeessel, and several others. After which they received the ancient priestly benediction from the minister and returned to the camps of their several commands. It was their last assemblage together, and was a sad realistic scene that will never be forgotten by those that witnessed same."

Frankland refers to the Civil War as a "Fratricidal War," in which "brother met brother face to face on the battlefield." As an example, he mentions two members of his own family:

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"Judah Frankland, for many years a resident of Nashville, Tennessee, a journalist by profession and city editor for a long time of the Nashville Gazette, at the commencement of the war went out with General Zollicoffer. Solomon Frankland, of New York, enlisted in an Eastern regiment and went to the front under General N. P. Banks. At the surrender of Port Hudson they met face to face, the 'Gray' surrendering to the 'Blue'… Both died after the peace from the effects of wounds received on the fields of battle."

Maintaining traditional Jewish observances under wartime conditions was extremely difficult, but a number of southern Jewish soldiers rose to the occasion. Reverend Maxmilian J. Michelbacher, the rabbi of Congregation Beth Ahaba in Richmond, wrote a special Jewish prayer for the Confederate soldiers. According to Jonathan D. Sarna in his book *American Judaism*, "Two brothers named Levy who fought for the Confederacy reputedly 'observed their religion faithfully… never even eating forbidden food.'" Sarna also points out that "…Jewish soldiers strove to observe Judaism's major annual holidays, notably Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in the fall, as well as Passover in the spring. …General Robert E. Lee, himself a committed Christian, pledged in 1864 to do all in his power 'to facilitate the observance of the duties of their religion by the Israelites in the army,' and to allow them 'every indulgence consistent with safety and discipline.'"

The situation in the north was somewhat different. In 1861 the military chaplaincy law was passed. This law stipulated that a regimental chaplain be a "regular ordained minister of some Christian denomination," in effect, depriving Jewish soldiers in the Union army of having their spiritual needs addressed and making the Jewish faith appear to be illegitimate. When two elected chaplains were rejected on account of this discriminatory law, a national debate involving both Christians and Jews ensued. Sarna writes that "Although many supported a change in the law, one evangelical paper complained that if the law were changed, 'one might despise and reject the Savior of men … and yet be a fit minister of religion.' It warned that 'Mormon debauchees, Chinese priests, and Indian conjurors' would stand next in line for government recognition—a tacit admission that the central issue under debate concerned the religious rights of non-Christians. To further the Jewish cause, one of the rejected chaplains, the Reverend Arnold Fischel, came to Washington …to lobby on behalf of a change in the chaplaincy law, and President Lincoln promised him support. After substantial wrangling, a revised bill that construed 'some Christian denomination' in the original legislation to read 'some religious denomination' became law on July 17, 1862. This represented a major political victory for the Jewish community and remains a landmark in the legal recognition of America's non-Christian faiths."

The archives of the American Jewish Historical Society contain fascinating accounts of soldiers' seders on the front during the Civil War—where questions of slavery and freedom inevitably took on an additional meaning. One such account was published in 1862 in the *Jewish Messenger*. J. A. Joel of the 23rd Ohio Volunteer Regiment wrote of a seder celebrated by Union soldiers in Fayette, West Virginia. Joel and 20 other Jewish soldiers were granted leave to

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observe Passover. A soldier home on leave in Cincinnati shipped matzot and hagaddot to his colleagues. Joel wrote: "We . . . sen[t] parties to forage in the country [for Passover food] while a party stayed to build a log hut for the services. . . We obtained two kegs of cider, a lamb, several chickens and some eggs. Horseradish or parsley we could not obtain, but in lieu we found a weed whose bitterness, I apprehend, exceeded anything our forefathers 'enjoyed....'

"We had the lamb, but did not know what part was to represent it at the table; but Yankee ingenuity prevailed, and it was decided to cook the whole and put it on the table, then we could dine off it, and be sure we got the right part. The necessaries for the charoses we could not obtain, so we got a brick which, rather hard to digest, reminded us, by looking at it, for what purpose it was intended....

"We all had a large portion of the herb ready to eat at the moment I said the blessing; each [ate] his portion, when horrors! What a scene ensued . . . The herb was very bitter and very fiery like Cayenne pepper, and excited our thirst to such a degree that we forgot the law authorizing us to drink only four cups, and . . . we drank up all the cider. Those that drank more freely became excited and one thought he was Moses, another Aaron, and one had the audacity to call himself a Pharaoh. The consequence was a skirmish, with nobody hurt, only Moses, Aaron and Pharaoh had to be carried to the camp, and there left in the arms of Morpheus."

On April 9, 1865, Confederate General-in-Chief Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox Court House. The surrender coincided with preparations for the eight-day holiday of Passover. According to Jonathan Sarna, "Throughout the North that Passover, Jews gave thanks for the redemption of their ancestors from slavery in Egypt and for the restoration of peace to the inhabitants of the United States. The calendrical link between the anniversary of the biblical Exodus and the victory of the Union forces seemed to the faithful almost providential."

Five days after the surrender, President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, and the next morning, synagogues were filled with grief-stricken worshippers, and mournful melodies replaced the customary Passover songs. It was important to Jews to be included in the memorials for Lincoln because of his friendship toward them. While Lincoln also was memorialized by rabbis in the South, their challenge was to somehow find meaning in the death and destruction, the burned and looted synagogues, and loss of self-government that southern Jews now faced. During the post-Civil War decades, Jews in southern cities gathered together as a community to celebrate Confederate Memorial Day and special sections of some Jewish cemeteries were set aside for Confederate victims of the "Fratricidal War." While northern Jews put the war behind them, many southern Jews, like their Christian neighbors, continued to focus on the martyrdom of lost sons and to insist that the cause for which so many had fought and died was right.